

## *Commander Eric G.L. Robinson*

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School Records show that E.G.L. Robinson arrived in Ruthin School as a Boarder aged twelve in 1920. He was bright, courteous and his work was always of a high standard. English, Physics and Mathematics he enjoyed.

He played for the School Rugby Team and won his Colour's for Cricket. The Steeplechases he was always one of the first back. Leaving School, he joined the R.A.F., in 1925. Gaining his Pilot's Licence. At the end of his contract he flew for a Company near Chester.

Flying became his main joy. He met and became friends with other Flying Old Ruthinians as the years rolled by. Guy Lloyd Carter Air Comodore met him in Bristol and they continued their friendship by Royal Mail. A National Newspaper started a craze for flying under Bridges, Eric was photographed flying under the Menai Suspension Bridge. The powers that be strongly disapproved and fines and loss of Pilot's Licence was introduced.

### **Commander Eric Glynne Robinson – Peace Pilot**



Prime Minister Neville Chamberlin shows the crowd a sheet of paper and utters the now well known words "Peace in our time". Commander Eric Robinson, age thirty, had Piloted him to Munich where the two leaders drew up their Munich Agreement. The photograph shows the crowd which had gathered on his return at Heston Aerodrome, West London on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1938.

On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, he was on a training flight with Commander Robert P.J. Leborgne, age 28 in an American Lockheed 14 Plane.

The two Pilots held the highest grade of Pilot for their profession and followed the prescribed practices they were handed before take-off. Towards the end of their flight the plane developed problems. They flew along the coast-line and back, out to sea several times obviously searching for a safe landing site.

The beach in that area has small patches of sand amidst a large area of large rocks. They went out over the sea and tried to gain height. The plane would not respond. On their return the plane flew straight into Redcliffe Bay Rock. The Pilots were killed, thrown out landing on the rocky site, where the planes fuel burst into flames. The site is probably one of the most difficult places to access. Help arrived but the flames were too severe.

Commander Robinson a very senior British Airways pilot had flown more hours on regular night flights than any other pilot. He had 5,000 hours flying experience to his credit, 1000 of which were spent flying night mails between London and Berlin.

Commander Leborgne was also an experienced pilot and had more than 2,300 flying hours to his credit.

Shortly before 11.00 a.m., about an hour after take-off from Heston Airport, the plane was seen flying low over Portishead and apparently in difficulties. Eye-witnesses said it had come from the direction of Avonmouth and appeared to lose altitude before circling the town, narrowly missing the Radio Station Masts up on Portishead Down before heading towards the coastline. Mr. Mc Manus, an Inspector at the Radio Station told newspaper reporters that he noticed the irregular noise of the plane's engines as it just missed the 300ft. high masts. He saw smoke coming from the pilot's cabin. He and his staff jumped into cars with fire extinguishers ready to help. Mr. Fursedon, said the plane seemed to somersault, right itself but then flames spurted from the fuselage causing the pilot to shut down the engines. The plane nose-dived, crashed into the rocky shoreline near Redcliffe Farm and burst into flames with a dull explosion. It was thought that the pilot had been trying to ditch into the sea. No witnesses saw any sign of the landing gear. The first people to arrive on the scene could not get near the wreckage as pools of petrol were blazing amongst the rocks.

Staff at the Nautical School saw the plane coming from the North at a height of between 400 and 500 ft. towards the school. As it did so, its left wing tilted as it went towards the staff bungalows before disappearing from site. Before hearing the crash, staff began to rush towards Redcliffe Bay with some of the boys carrying stretchers as it was obvious that the plane was in distress. Two of the instructors, Mr. Frederick Bishop, a physical training instructor, and Mr. D. Brown scrambled down the narrow footpath over huge stones to the beach to assist the rescue attempt.

The two pilots had been thrown from the airplane and their bodies were close together about 20ft away from the plane. The men were recovered and taken up over the rocks and muddy fields to a waiting ambulance. Papers were recovered from the bodies and handed to the Police. Dr. John Mc Cormick of Portishead examined the bodies on the day after the accident and described the terrible injuries. He said that death in both cases must have been instantaneous.

An inquest was opened very quickly after the accident to identify the two men and then adjourned until January 1939. The Air Ministry conducted their own inquiry and had concluded that the crash was due to an error of airmanship on the part of the pilot, but the details remained secret although they did send an Inspector to the local inquest to answer any queries.

More details emerged at the Inquest that continued on 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1939. The Coroner Mr. W.G. Burrough and his Jury heard at the Portishead Parrish Hall various vivid eye-witness accounts from local people who had witnessed the Scene. The day apparently had been fine with a wind of about 12 miles per hour coming from the north west. Visibility was clear at about ten miles and there was a blue sky.

The accident was also witnessed by Albert Wilkinson, a signalman of the Port of Bristol Authority who was on duty at the signal station at Walton Bay just down the coast towards Clevedon. He confirmed that the plane was flying at a height of about 300 ft. Mr. Wilkinson also said that the plane was about 200 yards over the Channel, from the coast-line before turning at a right angle towards the shore. When it got near to the cliff it appeared to drop and the plane went into a nose-dive before crashing and bursting into flame.

Mr Bishop, the Physical training instructor from the nautical school, told the Coroner that the plane was mis-firing and making an unusual noise. He added that it was quite common to see to see planes flying so low in the area.

Another witness Mr. Robert Harris of Seaton House in Nore Road was at Lodge Farm, which stands above Weston in Gordano, and is about a mile from the coast. He said that the plane banked as if to go inland and was getting lower all the time. He thought it was just flying low as did a lot of other planes but noticed that it was making a lot more noise than others had.

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution at Weston-super-Mare had received a message from Bristol Airport, stating that an accident had occurred at Sea, and consequently the local Lifeboat was needed. Just as the maroons were about to be fired to signal the crew, there came further news that the crash had happened on the shore and the rescue attempt was abandoned.

Another witness, Mr. John Routledge of Nore Road who had been walking along the cliff path saw the plane which was about 100 ft up and losing height rapidly. At one point he was only 40ft., away from it. He felt the engines were running alright apart from an occasional splutter. Mr. Routledge was the first person to reach crash scene but could not get near because of the flames.

Representatives from British Airways attended the Inquest and the Chief instructor Archibald Macmillan for the Airways said he had told Commander Robinson to taxi off and then at a safe height to change seats and hand over to Commander Leborgne who would then familiarize himself with the controls and carry out preliminary flying exercises, Commander Robinson was then to re-assume control at an altitude of not less than 2000 metres to demonstrate the stall characteristic of that type of plane. The lesson to conclude with Commander Robinson flying back to Heston and demonstrating an approach in landing. He said that Commander Robinson had agreed to carry out the instructions given him and had added "will it be alright if I fly near to the West to do this?" Mr. Macmillan had replied "Certainly, anywhere clear of local aerodromes". The plane then took off round about 9.50 a.m.

The Coroner asked who Mr. Macmillan thought was in charge of the plane at the time of the accident. He said that it was difficult to know, but that he thought that considering the height at which they were flying; Commander Robinson would have been at the controls. He could give no reason as to why the plane was flying so low and added that both pilots were "of great value to the company and country generally, they were first class men and had been entered into the company's records as pilots above the average". Mr. Macmillan also had a very high opinion of the Lockheed 14 although they had not had planes for very long.

British Airways was the only company flying this type of machine in England which was quite capable of continuing a flight if one engine failed.

Mr. John Williams, the Chief Inspector of British Airways said that he had issued a certificate of flight for the machine and had carried out an inspection the night before and had the engine “run up” on the following day. He had seen it depart and it had left the ground quite normally.

One witness had seen flames coming from the plane just before it crashed but Mr. Williams said this was quite normal because if Commander Robinson was trying to land, he would be throttling back which would cause flames to come from the exhaust. The Coroner asked for Mr. Williams’ opinion as to why the accident had happened. He said it that it sounded as if the plane had had a stall, which meant that it had lost its life.

Mr. Macmillan, the British Airways Instructor thought that the machine was indulging in in dangerously low flying at 300 feet and in view of the disturbed and turbulent conditions that could happen around a coast line, it had got into a stall at an altitude so low that it was not possible to recover from it. Knowing what he did of the pilot, he couldn’t understand why the aircraft was flying so low.

In his summing up, the Coroner said that the local people who had rushed to the accident to help should be proud of themselves. He concluded that it could only be assumed that because Commander Robinson had asked to fly West, he had done so to be as near as possible not the place where his son was at school. The crash was a calamity not only to the pilots relatives and friends but also to the Country. Commander Robinson was a pilot with an ability above average and he had been selected to do one of the most important duties which anyone could be called upon to perform. The Coroner then returned a verdict of accidental death caused through the machine stalling being caused by reasons unknown.

Commander Robinson’s wife had been staying with her husband’s family at a bungalow called “Beechwood” in Nore Road near to the old Bracken Garden Centre, with her two boys, Larry who was 5 and attending school and his younger brother Carl.

After the accident Mrs. Robinson received the following telegram from the Prime Minister. “Greatly grieved of the news of your husband’s fatal accident. Please accept my deepest sympathy. I have grateful recollections of his wonderful skill”.

Local people still have vivid memories of the day. Beryl Broad heard the engines spluttering, as the plane passed over St. Peter’s School, she also heard rockets being fired. As a toddler Michael Tebbutt heard the screaming of the planes engines and ran to his mother in fear as it flew so low over the bungalows in the Nautical School Grounds where the family lived.

Alan Baker, a local boy as a favour to Mrs. Robinson used to take Larry on the crossbar of his bike to St. Joseph’s Convent that had a school gate further down Nore Road, where the child was collected by one of the Nuns. This plane had flown close to the Convent and so all the children had heard it. The small boy knew what had happened to the plane but the fact that one of the victims was his father was kept from him for a while.

Commander Richardson’s funeral cortege travelled from Mrs. Robinson’s house at Beechwood, Nore Road, to the Parish Church, where many mourners attended the service. Great sympathy had been aroused by the tragedy and many houses and shops on the route from Nore Road to the Church had their blinds drawn. The approach to the Church was lined either side by local ex-servicemen, members of the Severn Lodge of Freemasons and St. John’s Ambulance. Six Freemasons carried the coffin which was draped with the Union Jack and surmounted by a large Cross of red, white and blue flowers. The service was conducted by the Rector, the Rev’d. P. Rowlands and the surpliced choir led the singing of the Hymns, Mrs. Windibank was Organist.

Besides members of the family, the local community and representatives of World Airways attended the funeral. There were also representatives from the German Embassy and the German Airways.

There were also many floral tributes. Especially poignant was the one that said “To dear Daddy, love from his boys, Larry and Carl”.

Sandy Tebbutt.



He was buried in the Churchyard of Portishead Parish St. Peter’s Church. The stone is adorned by a carving of a Plane similar to the American Lockheed twin engine plane, and the following inscription:

“Sacred to the memory of Commander E.G.L. Robinson the beloved husband of Tyrra, who so tragically lost his life at Redcliffe Bay, on November 22nd 1938 aged 30 years.

It is not the length of existence which counts, but what is achieved during that existence, however short.

On that fated day, Eric was accompanied by Commander Robert P.J. Leborgne, aged 28.

Portishead is a town near the coast. That is its position on one side is relatively flat but on the Coastal side, the land falls very steeply into the sea.

I spent hours in Portishead. There is a very rough, winding coastal path, I walked it first towards the two

Severn Bridges. Then, back to my starting point and walked the other way.

The land falls steeply into the Sea. When the tide retreats the Beach is well covered by Stones. Some a handful growing to some the size of a 3ft., cube.